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Brazilian Gold and the Lisbon Mint House (1720–1807)*

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Abstract

The purpose of this article is to present the official registers of the arrival of Brazilian gold in Portugal, the *Livros dos Manifestos do 1% do ouro do Brasil*, which are part of a documentary database that exists at the Lisbon Mint House. Discussion of this source and the data provided by it can contribute towards a better historiographic understanding of the issues related to precious metals. The intention here is also to make a comparative analysis between the statistical series already available about the flow of gold across the Atlantic to Portugal and the data available about Spain, facilitating comparisons between the production of the official sources for gold and silver in the two countries. Contrary to what happened in the case of the *Casa de la Contratación*, which lost control over cargoes after 1668, the Portuguese legislation always afforded the Lisbon Mint House a relatively centralizing role in the receipt of gold remittances.

The first section of this article describes the institutional framework behind the source of the *Livros dos Manifestos*, making a comparison with Spain, which did not lose its relative homogeneity in spite of the changes introduced through legislative procedures. In the second section, a comparison is made between this official source and the results provided by other statistical series describing gold flows at that time.

The period under scrutiny is that between 1720 and 1807. The beginning of this time scale is explained by the centralization policy introduced in 1720 when a 1% tax first began to be levied on the value of the gold shipped to Lisbon. The *Livros dos Manifestos* ended in 1807, when gold ceased to be a source of tax revenue for the budgets of the Portuguese state.

Keywords

Precious metals; Brazilian gold; Lisbon Mint House; *Casa de la Contratación*

Resumo

Neste artigo apresenta-se os registos oficiais das chegadas de ouro a Portugal, *Livros de Manifestos do 1% do ouro do Brasil*, que fazem parte de um acervo documental existente na Casa da Moeda de Lisboa. A discussão da construção desta fonte, assim como os dados por esta disponibilizados contribuem para o aperfeiçoamento do conhecimento historiográfico das temáticas relacionadas com metais preciosos. Perspectiva-se uma análise comparativa com as séries até agora disponíveis sobre os fluxos de ouro que atravessaram o Atlântico. Este estudo comparado amplia-se, em termos do processo de construção de ambas as fontes oficiais, às séries da prata disponíveis para Espanha. Contrariamente ao ocorrido na *Casa de la Contratación* que perdeu o controlo dos fluxos de prata chegados a Sevilha depois de 1668, a legislação portuguesa conferiu sempre à Casa da Moeda de Lisboa um papel relativamente centralizador sobre os fluxos de ouro brasileiro.

Na primeira secção deste artigo apresenta-se o enquadramento institucional de produção dos *Livros de Manifestos* que, apesar de algumas alterações legislativas nunca perdeu a sua relativa homogeneidade. Na segunda secção confrontam-se os resultados sobre os fluxos de ouro obtidos através dos *Livros de Manifestos* com os apresentados em diversos estudos a partir de outras fontes.

Os limites temporais situam-se entre 1720 e 1807. O início do período explica-se pela política de centralização introduzida em 1720, quando a taxa de 1% passou a ser cobrada sobre o valor do ouro remetido para Lisboa. Os *Livros de Manifestos* finalizam em 1807 quando o ouro deixou de ser uma fonte de receita nos orçamentos do Estado Português.

Palavras-chave

Metais preciosos; Ouro do Brasil; Casa da Moeda de Lisboa; Casa de la Contratación

“(..)*gold (...)* a barbarous relic”
(John Maynard Keynes, *A Tract on Monetary Reform*)

Introduction

One of the themes developed in the international historiography of the Atlantic shipping system is related to the trading of precious metals between the 16th and 18th centuries. The effects that this trade had on the movement of prices (from Hamilton, 1934, to Flynn, 1996), the fluctuations of the Iberian and Latin American economies (Romano, 2004), the monetarization and growth of the European economy and the decline of the Iberian states (Drelichman, 2005b) are merely a few of the ongoing research topics.

However, it is the remittances of silver, rather than those of gold, that have tended to dominate European and Latin American historiography.¹ The study of the Brazilian gold remittances has been deeply influenced by the theme of Anglo-Portuguese relations (Sideri, 1978; Fisher, 1984). The main aim has been to explain how England not only played a crucial and central role in international payments during the 18th century but also accumulated sufficient reserves of this precious metal to be able to adopt gold monometallism at an earlier date, in 1821 (Redish, 1990). In turn, Portugal has traditionally been seen as a peripheral economy in Europe through which gold passed without this process having had any long-term economic consequences. The gold flows are deemed to have had merely short-term effects, with two particular short periods having been identified and chronologically situated in the first and second halves of the 18th century. The first half of the century is thus presented as displaying a rising trend in remittances as gold production increased, while during the second half of the century the decline in production led to a decrease in remittances from across the Atlantic, causing a downward trend and leading to a crisis in the Portuguese economy. The studies by Macedo (1982 and 1989), together with those by Vitorino Magalhães Godinho (1955), discovered a direct association between gold flows and short-term economic trends.

Recent studies have shifted the emphasis given to Brazilian remittances by exploring monetary approaches. An assessment has been made of the effects of gold remittances on the supply and circulation of money in Portugal in the 18th century. It can be concluded that, despite the fact that the trade deficit with Great Britain drained off a lot of the gold, part of the supply of this precious metal nonetheless caused the sustained rise in prices, the increased level of monetarization of the economy, and also a probable increase in hoarding in Portugal during the 18th century (Sousa, 2006).²

All of the studies made to date that needed to assess information on Brazilian gold flows in order to make their calculations and reach their conclusions used as fundamental references the studies by Virgílio Noya Pinto (Pinto, 1979) and Michel Morineau (Morineau, 1985). Consular correspondence and the information recorded in the Dutch Gazettes were the sources used, which in the case of Morineau's studies continued until 1788. Essentially basing his findings on consular correspondence, Noya Pinto stopped at the beginning of the 1760s, justifying his decision by the fact that after 1765, the date when the fleets were brought to an end, diplomatic correspondence did not provide accurate information on the evolution of the rhythm and rate of gold arrivals in Portugal. As far as Morineau's data are concerned, despite the fact that the series of the Dutch Gazettes continued until 1786, the author stresses that the free navigation system brought into force as early as September 1765 had disorientated the Gazette writers.

The existence of an official fiscal source, the *Livros dos Manifestos do 1% do ouro do Brasil*, can be added to the consular and trading information. Godinho's pioneering article, *Frotas do açúcar e frotas do ouro*, dating from 1950, mentioned these ledgers. Godinho's data were recently made available and included in a Master's Degree dissertation (Lopes, 2001). This has resulted in the publication of the untreated data up to 1736 and for the isolated year of 1740. The quantity of information provided by the registers in the *Livros dos Manifestos* made their exhaustive study a lengthy process, which could only be carried out with a